

*English and Lithuanian Poetry:  
the Canon Enriched*

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from University of Tartu

The main aim of the article – to ponder upon the particular transformations of literary canon having in mind the parallels of English and Lithuanian poetry of two different periods – the middle of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21 century. Ecocriticism and the main issues of Ecopsychology will serve as a certain theoretical base for various assumptions and comparisons. The problem of literary canon could be treated in many ways, but this time the examples chosen should demonstrate the ability of particular literature to grasp the main rules of the canon and to enrich it without any transformations, to use (consciously or not) its “carcass” in order to inspire “the plot” of literature itself with new power of thought or emotion. While speaking about the perspectives of so called distant reading and rethinking the aims of those interested in comparative studies Franco Moretti explains the relationship between “foreign” and “local” in native literature: “For me, it’s more of a triangle: foreign form, local material – *and local form*. Simplifying somewhat: foreign *plot*; local *characters*; and then, local *narrative voice*...” (Moretti 2000). Moretti was speaking about the novel, but the scheme indicated could be valid for other genres as well. So this assumption will be checked after short analysis of the texts of Lithuanian and English poets.

The concept of literature as a system (Moretti 2000) suggests specific way of literary analysis based on Ecocriticism, encompassing Ecopsychology and Bioregionalism. Constantly growing interest in interdisciplinary aspects of comparative studies justifies those ecocritical tools and open new perspectives for literary studies in general. According to English ecocritic and nature poet Terry Gifford, “culture is at its most challenged when it seeks to offer a complex representation of nature that combines normally separated modes of knowledge: the scientific and the aesthetic, the disinterested and the celebratory, the supposedly factual and the frankly emotional. But our culture is how we live our nature. Mixed and multiple discourses are our natural voice” (Gifford 2006: 51). “Mixed and multiple discourses” could be represented by ecocriticism in the best way.

Ecocriticism as a new branch of literary research could be treated as a link between “eco” and “ego”, between our ecosystem and its literary representations and interpretations. The first time literature was observed from the ecological point of view was in 1974, when Joseph Meeker’s book *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* appeared. According to J. Meeker, a human being is a specific “literary creature”; the capacity to create (to write and to read) distinguishes him from other species: “Human beings are the earth’s only literary creatures... If the creation of literature is an important characteristic of the human species, it should be examined carefully and honestly to discover its influence upon human behaviour and the natural environment. (...) Is it an activity which adapts us better to the world or one which estranges us from it?” (Meeker 1974: 3–4). Such questions could seem hopeless – is it possible to answer them unambiguously? Ecocritics find an excuse: the answer is not the main thing; the most urgent task is to cease ignoring ecological problems, which have the influence on human beings (a significant part of ecosystem) too. Having in mind the most important statements of ecocritics, there could be made a conclusion, that “cultured personality” eventually should be treated as “ecopersonality”, taking care of the environment and its ecology.

As we can state after analyzing many different definitions of the concept, ecology as such analyzes correlations of unanimated and organized nature, the interrelations of different organisms and the environment they inhabit. The most important problem of modern ecology – the research of harmoniously organized nature, of various opposite processes, of the laws of the balance, which determine the formation and stability of that balance. While speaking about literary studies, harmony and so called spiritual stability is not the aim of the research in general: the researchers are interested in various kinds of correlations. Distant reading suggests still more ways of understanding panorama of literature. Possible fusion of ecology and literary research emphasize the process, trace various changes of environment or in the realm of culture, therefore the suggestions of ecocritics not to separate nature and culture seem reasonable and acceptable. “...wilderness and civilization are not alternatives, just as culture and nature are not separate entities. A good culture – a properly civilized nation – is aware that, as a member of a complex ecosystem, our species must use its culture to look after the other species’ cultures and communities on which it depends” (Gifford 2006: 36).

So culture is identified with “civilized nation”, which is equated to any community; as we see, the threshold between culture and nature is eliminated, the vitally important dependence is highlighted. So having in mind such

assumptions, the concept of anthropocentrism should be changed with ecocentrism, while underlining the necessity to destroy the motiveless hierarchies. Nevertheless, it's impossible to ponder upon issues of ecocentrism not discussing the characteristics and capacity of a human-being, who is usually not so smart while speaking about his attitudes towards nature and global problems of ecology. One of the ways to make a human being become interested in nature and in everything what is around him is to introduce him to his everyday landscape or particular places essentially. Literary texts can play the role of particular mediators between the individual and his environment. As it will be proved later, the poetry of Vladas Šlaitas, Donaldas Kajokas and Terry Gifford can be treated as capable of improvement of forgotten "ecolinks".

The texts of Lithuanian emigrant poet Vladas Šlaitas<sup>1</sup> will help to illustrate the validity of some of the statements mentioned above. His poetry cannot be compared to any Lithuanian literary generation or group of that period (of the middle of the 20th century) and could be understood as distinctive experiment, separated from other vanguard trends, which spread on the first part of the 20th century in Lithuania. Šlaitas' poetry is specific because of extremely laconic poetical language and everyday words, more characteristic to prose narratives. Šlaitas was very fond of Thomas Stearns Eliot and felt great influence of his texts; he even intended to start publishing literary journal under the title "New Literature" (may be fascinated by the ideas of New Criticism, which were very popular at that time), but because of financial problems failed to do that. T. S. Eliot was one of those who managed to bring poetry to prose as close as possible, but at the same time he endured specific atmosphere of poetry and made modern poetical text extremely complicated (Revell 1991). Šlaitas, on the contrary, used to write very simple texts and gained the name of the poet writing "naked verse". Speaking about the situation of Lithuanian poetry at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Lithuanian literary researcher Vytautas Kubilius formulated some questions: "Why does (...) a poet look for his identity in various objects of his everyday life more and more often? Why does he try to

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<sup>1</sup> Vladas Šlaitas was born in 1920, september 27, in Cheliabinsk, Russia. His father left for Cheliabinsk in order to earn more money for living. He returned back to Lithuania in 1922 together with his little son and a young wife Antanina Ramashkova – Šlaitienė, who was only about eighteen then. V. Šlaitas' poetry was more popular in emigration (he left Lithuania in 1943; after the Nazis declared all-out mobilization for Lithuanians, he decided to join their army because was too afraid for his mother; it was stated, that all disobedient young Lithuanians will be punished by taking their relatives to different work camps. So after the war he was taking part in, from 1945 till 1947 he lived in DP camps in Germany and then left for Scotland, and a bit later – for England, where he lived till his death in 1995) and his first book of verse in Lithuania appeared only in 1982 and was greeted with little enthusiasm.

concentrate his feelings and reflections in the sight of particular visible thing?” (Kubilius 2003:101). The answers into these questions are to be linked with the process of modernization of the world, changed tempo of life, new technologies and may be many other things; nowadays still urgent issues of one’s search for identity and certain experience of influences could be grasped as closely connected with the questions of space and place, which the experts of Ecocriticism are so interested in. So here is one of Šlaitas’ poems (“Spring in Lithuanian Provinces”), which could be characterised as written according to the model suggested by T. S. Eliot (having in mind the form, but not the complexity of the content) and therefore as if “fitting” into the canon of modern poetry of the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and at the same time encoding possibilities to read the text from the ecocritical point of view:

That spring in the small town  
was more than spring in town.  
It was a statement of one’s love and dreams  
while listening to the sax red rooster was playing  
to spring forever young, and youth as well.

That spring in the small town  
was more than statement of one’s dreams.  
There was a bond of love and heart established  
with one’s small native town forever,  
while listening to the tunes of spring, played for one’s youth.<sup>2</sup>

Nostalgic feelings for one’s place and the experience of specific ideal state of being provoke ambiguous associations – the most precious memories revive in foreign place, which could be warmed by the place virtually experienced. Having in mind Šlaitas’ urge to use everyday language in his poetical texts we

<sup>2</sup> Here is the original Lithuanian version of the poem “Pavasaris lietuviškoj provincijoj”:

Pavasaris provincijos miestelyje  
buvo daugiau negu pavasaris miestelyje.  
Tai buvo meilės ir svajonių pareiškimas  
raudono gaidžio saksofonui amžinai  
jaunam pavasariui jaunystę grojant.

Pavasaris provincijos miestelyje  
buvo daugiau negu svajonių pareiškimas.  
Tai buvo meilės ir širdies prisirišimas  
prie savo gimtojo miestelio, amžinai  
jaunam pavasariui jaunystę grojant.

(Quoted from Šlaitas V. *Saulė ant šaligatvio*, Vilnius: Lietuvos rašytojų sąjungos leidykla, 1997, p. 419.)

can treat his poetical form as foreign and content – as local; emigrant experience and one common feature characteristic to all emigrant authors – to write about native land and former life having in mind virtual landscapes – enables to speak about Moretti's "local narrative voice", which is a bit melancholic, but still full of harmonious emotions, encoding deep relations with well known place and natural cycles of life, as if repeating the cycles of nature. Besides, T. S. Eliot's lessons learned by Šlaitas in emigration at that period (in early fifties and sixties), were not common in Lithuania. Therefore we are to agree with the fact that great literature influenced Lithuanian culture, though it is clear, that "native content" remained unchanged even in emigration: the sense of deep connection with one's land or place is essential and cannot be changed or invaded so easily.

While analysing Šlaitas' poetry it would be useful to use some statements suggested by the experts of Bioregionalism. The concept of Bioregionalism was formulated in 1973, in the United States, and as a concrete term was legitimated in 1976, in the article written by Peter Berg and Raymond Dasmann "Reinhabiting California". The term is ambiguous, indicating geographical and spiritual territory: the place and the ideas about the ways of living in that place. According to Berg, the idea of bioregion "doesn't come from pure natural science. Bioregionalism is a cultural idea. It's an attempt to answer, "Who am I, what am I, and what am I going to do about it?" It is a way for people to look at the place where they live in terms of fitting into natural characteristics" (Aberley 1998: 13). It could be rather complicated to define the meaning of "bioregion", because it constantly changes depending on our different criteria. Bioregion could be defined from the perspective of cultural and spiritual resonance. As emigrant poet Šlaitas managed to naturalize in different culture and even to learn from it, but his new place of living has never turned into genuine bioregion. Here is one of many examples, illustrating encoded inability to establish a new place, provoking inspiring "spiritual resonance":

You were much more than garden in the town.  
Much more than trees under the summer sky.  
For me you were the rising sun over the garden  
and all over the sky in summer time.

It's mournful autumn now. The sky is pale.  
 And I am elsewhere. With no home. Without the garden.  
 But you remained for me as obelisk for love  
 over the garden in the sky in summer.<sup>3</sup>  
 ("Obelisk for Love", Šlaitas 1997: 359)

Nostalgia and melancholy could be treated as "local voices" mentioned by Moretti, which are characteristic to "displaced" ones, who were a kind of forced to exchange "local" for "global".

While pondering upon the problem globally, bioregion could be treated as your country; while looking locally – as your homestead or your block. Everything will depend on one's ability to identify with the environment and on the level of the knowledge about the environment. Though the knowledge is very important, it's not essential; the example of Šlaitas' case proves that English poetry inspired him in his search for a new form of poetry, but former bioregional resonance established in his native land could not be transformed into different quality.

Almost half a century later since the first book of Šlaitas' verse appeared (his first book was published in Detmold and entitled "Human Psalms") literary experts acknowledged different situation in Lithuanian poetry: "New type of a poet starts to form – now we have the poet-observer, "objectivist", the teller of depersonalized stories, the reporter of dramatic monologues, the creator of parables. (...) poetry adopts prosaic space and prosaic vocabulary, prosaic rhythms and paragraphs. The poem itself passes to gestures and intonations of spoken language" (Kubilius 2003: 98). Creative work of Šlaitas was legitimated, prosaic rhythmical speech gained the status of modern poetry, Lithuanian canon was "officially" enriched.

We can agree that poetical text is the product of creative consciousness and the target of that product is another consciousness and imagination; so it would be fair enough to turn to the theories and statements of the psychologists.

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<sup>3</sup> Original text in Lithuanian:  
 Tu man buvai daugiau nei miesto sodas.  
 Daugiau nei medžiai vasaros danguj.  
 Tu man buvai kaip saulės pasirodymas  
 virš miesto sodo vasaros danguj.  
  
 Dabar graudus ruduo. Dangus pablyškęs.  
 Esu svetur. Be sodo. Be namų.  
 Bet tu likai kaip meilės obeliskas  
 virš miesto sodo vasaros danguj.

“A lot of modern psychologists think that the main features of the conscious are cognition and straightforwardness towards an object. The conscious could be defined as selective attention to regular percepts, thoughts and feelings” (Myers 2000: 213). If this “selective attention” is directed towards the undivided object, towards the more complicated percept, one can expect the more active expression of spiritual power which provokes the efforts to experience, to learn and to reflect on the aspects discovered; that is, after “muting” the duality of nature and culture we are used to, the percept of the environment will become more complicated, but after the process of perception the individual *Ego* could become richer, and the environment – as well. Such assumption could be based on the so called system theory, according to which “all active systems are composed of hierarchic levels. Each level is composed of subsystems, which are related to other parts of their system and to the systems of other levels.” (Čepukienė 2003: 54) The emphasis is not on the components the unit is made of, but on the relations between the components; the separate component can be grasped only after the general functioning of all the components have been grasped. The perception of the environment as a system could help us think about ourselves more clearly and the system mentioned could be grasped better with a help of transpersonal practices. Ecopsychology explains such different links between culture and nature and opens new possibilities for the writers to play the role of those, capable of reviving so called “ecosubconsciousness”.

Modern Lithuanian poet Donaldas Kajokas (1953) could be treated as one of the most serious ecocritical/ecopsychological authors, therefore it would be interesting to compare his works to canonical ecocritical texts of Terry Giffrod (1946). Both of them are really good at reviving the ecological subconscious of the individual *ego*, bringing a human being closer to the natural environment in its broad understanding, and changing one’s attitude towards the other members of the entire biosphere. So called ecological *ego* is treated as an ability to experience the wide network of the relations, connecting with the closest and the broadest environment. This imaginative “conjoining *ego*” should anticipate the environment and at the same time all the problems stipulated by our industrial culture; anyway, obvious problems stimulate the urge to look for the wise solutions. So the only unsolved question is – how to awake this ecological *ego*. Literature could be one of the ways, but it is important to define, what texts should be named as the best catalysts animating the ecological subconscious.

The poetry of Kajokas seems suitable for ecocritical analysis because of its particular atmosphere – his texts encode undeniable unity, and the impression of unity is being created not by the images themselves, but by the associations provoked by them. Gifford admits that his texts are based on the ideas of Ecocriticism; so it would be interesting to ponder upon the question – whether consciously chosen ecocritical writing differs from the not engaged creative work, encoding particular spiritual or cultural experiences. In other words, it would be useful to learn, whether it is possible to create suggestive “ecotexts” not knowing the main postulates of Ecocriticism.

The simplest examples of both authors are poetical texts having particular graphic view. While teaching his students Gifford uses so called “amulets” – short poems written in such a way, that the last word of every line is the same as the first word of the next line. The students get the task to write the amulet improvising on a particular theme. As Gifford claims, “everything is joined to everything else, sometimes in ways that are invisible. In front of us there are invisible chains that make the most unlikely connections” (Gifford 2006: 36). These connections could be illustrated by the “amulets”; there are some versions of amulets in Kajokas’ poetry as well. Here are some examples of the amulets of both authors:

A gale tears across the Fens  
 The Fen wind turns white sails  
 The sails drive the windshaft  
 The windshaft creaks its cogs  
 Small cogs still turn my wheel  
 My wheel is driven by phone calls  
 Your calls crackle across the sea  
 The sea will turn our tide  
 Tides rise to your return  
 Your return will cause a gale.  
 (“Autumn Amulet” (Gifford 2003: 31))

the sitting-room mouse is rolling  
 the night-bead its helper is  
 the moon its helper is  
 the woman and in the dimple of her cheek  
 yes, in the dimple of her cheek  
 her helper is me  
 my helper is the sitting-room mouse  
 rolling the transparent night-bead  
 (“The Transparent One” (Kajokas 1985: 25))



Gifford's "amulet" illustrates the system theory, only here the hierarchy is ruined and a new order or formation is made – *the gale, the fens, the wind, the sails, the windshaft, the cog, the wheel, the phone calls, you, the sea, we, the tides, a gale*; here all the links of the imaginable chain are closely related to one another and all of them are of the same value. If the reader comprehended the charm of such a union and fixed the equality of "natural" and "cultural" images, may be it would be possible to change the schemes of thinking and to emphasize the duality not so often. Kajokas' text is very much like "amulet", though the structure is a bit disorganized. Playful eight lines do not commit to the search of deep meanings; it is not necessary for the reader to ponder upon the feelings and emotions or even the transcendental experiences of the concrete "me", but the perfect formation of everything is obvious: *the sitting-room mouse* attains the attention of the *moon* and eventually this mystery of the night embraces *a woman* and *me*. The images of different level makes the impression of undivided unity, convey transparent emotion, which ensures the anticipation of harmonious states. The image of the woman and implicit masculine *me* as if harmonise the being, makes the dialogue of a mouse and the Moon simpler and more understandable for the reader.

Gifford's way is simpler than Kajokas' – the ordinary word (the speech supported by the inner rhythm) neatly states the fundamental truth of Ecocriticism: everything is closely connected, and a human being is only the mere link of grand variety dependent on other segments of the system. Kajokas' texts are full of subtle hints and ambiguous riddles, and to unriddle them means to grasp the harmonious unity of all the members of the biosphere. While reading Gifford we are as if to process the information, stipulating particular rational reasoning:

Once upon a time there was a charcoal burner  
who worked at his sooty furnace in the olive groves  
beside the dry river bed beyond the cement factory.

His chickens scraped at the woodland floor  
free of fear, for there are no foxes on Crete,  
only Beech Martins and hungry Albanians...

(From "The Charcoal Burner's Tale" (Gifford 2003: 90))

I'm at 39,000 feet and it's desperate.  
I don't know how to start this poem.  
Home is rushing up fast and I rarely  
remember dreams long enough to tell,  
even this brief Grand Canyon dream.  
Should I begin with the evening before,  
camping a mile below the earth's rim,  
the sun setting down the river's length,  
orange ancient walls, surging brown water,  
the lightest breeze lifting white leaves?  
(From "To Alison" (Gifford 2003: 44))

Such poetical texts attract the reader because of the perfect imitation of everyday speech – we can listen to the story and admire the heart-to-heart atmosphere, as if a concrete reader has been chosen as a very important addressee and is approached by somebody having a strong desire to share one's personal experience. The creative work of Gifford reflects one of the principles of Ecopsychology, formulated by Theodor Roszak – ecological *ego* is being destroyed by the tendency to dominate while suppressing the other (Roszak 1992); urban culture treated as opposition to natural spaces not touched by people is put into question. Those natural spaces are much more interesting and powerful, evoking curiosity; so such curiosity and the efforts to explore nature and to experience its majesty or immensity are not only fixed in the texts, but provoke particular response of the reader as well. Such "depicted" experiences make the wider environment closer and arouse various emotions, which have rather important functions – mobilize and synthesize individual *ego* (the function of synthesising should be treated as an impulse to unite different aspects of the environment; emotions help to organize one's experience). We can make an assumption, that so called "constructing" poetical texts should model eco-thinking – they state indirectly the variety of feelings, stipulated by nature, and encourage to experience the nature proximately.

Kajokas' texts are oriented to the spheres of ecological subconscious but not to the objects of the outer environment. The texts encoding rather simple everyday states could be read as original eco-ideas:

The birch grove. The lake.  
 The bathhouse.  
 Two bees. Mimicking Vivaldi.  
 The red boat. The reflection.  
 More vivid than the boat.  
 ("Hyperreality – the Engraving of Memory" (Kajokas 2005: 84))

Cultural system is being delicately incorporated into the world of nature: *Two bees. Mimicking Vivaldi*. The pastel landscape of the first two lines as if dissected by the image of the *red boat*, which divides the reality of the text into two levels – the real one and the more real. And it's very difficult to say, which of them is more natural; we can only presume, that the superior is the reflection, *more vivid than the boat*. The more stimulated experience seems real, the more the real contact with the environment fades, but we can make an assumption that temporarily broken relations with the closest environment would enliven the "far corners" of the subconscious and may be animate the eco-subconscious, which is so important to ecocritics. The reference to closer (or may be more attractive) reality of the reflection could be grasped as the suggestion to indulge in empiricism, rather often revealing the most correct answers.

While treating the environment in ones specific way, the identity is being shaped specifically. "Both nature and writing (the former being an external presence, the latter a process of verbalizing personal experience) demand and contribute to an author's awareness of self and non-self. By confronting "face to face" the separate realm of nature, by becoming aware of its "otherness", the writer implicitly becomes more deeply aware of his or her own dimension, limitations of form and understanding, and processes of grappling with the unknown" (Slovic 1996: 352). In one of his interviews<sup>4</sup> Kajokas has said:

... I've tried to answer the question still not comprehensible to the end: who am I? I don't know. It seems that I know everything in this particular conscious level, but when there appear various constructions of the words it strikes you that there are a lot of weird things.

May be the efforts to contemplate everything what is around us could ease the burden of such ignorance and provide some hope to see the light.

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<sup>4</sup> Kajokas was interviewed by Audronė Lapenienė at Maironis museum (museum of Lithuanian Literature in Kaunas) in 5 December 2007. The text of the interview is in <http://www.rasyk.lt/ivykiai/donaldas-kajokas-gyvenimas-laimingas-sapnas.html>.

So we can conclude, that Kajokas' poetical texts, exquisitely interacting images and sometimes specific irony from the point of view of ecocritical and ecopsychological postulates are more efficient than Gifford's informative verse, which could be compared to modern pastorals: while reading Lithuanian author it's not necessary to learn concrete meanings of the poems; during the process of reading the associations will bring us closer to the apparent ideal unity. The English author in comparison with Lithuanian is not bound to encode; he creates poetical "reality show" in wild or tamed nature while appealing to the sense and conscious of the readers: a human being should be responsible for the wide environment and the whole "community" of the biosphere; he should remember one of the most important rules: the rights of an individual are the rights of the whole planet. Such poetry could be compared to hyperreality in art: the surplus of reality in poetical texts brings the readers into the whirlwinds of the substitutes of reality, and after the escape of those whirlwinds the reader should feel himself more acquainted to the closer or wider environment. The texts of the English author stimulate imaginary senses, and Kajokas' poetry provokes the emotions, which stimulate specific thoughts; these emotions can make the way to the ecosubconscious much shorter. So in this case we could speak about literary canon enriched having in mind English literature as the target literature and small Lithuanian literature as the source literature, though this suggestion is speculative and made by the representative of provisory source literature; besides, so called target literature in this case barely knows the works of the source literature cited, therefore such enrichment could seem suspicious, but still it's good to imagine, that such situation is possible.

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